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The role of memory in populist discourse: the case of the Italian Second Republic

Abstract

This paper takes as its starting point Laclau's (2005) and Mouffe's (2005) conceptualisation of populism as counter-hegemonic and argues, with reference to the Italian case, that populism not only takes the form of a rejection of the establishment and political elites, but also entails a construction of the 'people', which requires, as well as the development of empty signifiers as shown by Laclau, also the deployment of common myths based on a collective memory of an imagined past. The paper therefore argues, in line with Savage (2012), that the role of memory in populist discourse has been underestimated. Specifically, many populist movements and leaders engage in a fundamental redefinition of who constitutes the people accompanied by mistrust and demonization of the 'other', which is predicated upon (and justified with recourse to) a re-imagining of the nation's and/or democracy's 'founding moment'. Furthermore, many populist movements make use of a political rhetoric revolving around the 'anti-subversive impulse' (Donner, 1981) and aimed at instilling fear and a sense of being under threat.

Keywords populism, collective memory, antagonism, Italian Second Republic

Introduction

This paper takes as its starting point Laclau's (2005a) and Mouffe's (2005) conceptualisation of populism as adversarial to the dominant hegemonic project and argues, with reference to the Italian case, that populism takes the form of a rejection of the establishment and the political elites, but also entails a construction of 'the people', which requires, as well as the development of empty signifiers as shown by Laclau, also the deployment of common myths based on a collective memory of an imagined past. The paper therefore argues, in line with Savage (2012), that the role of memory in populist discourse has been underestimated. Specifically, many populist movements and leaders engage in a fundamental redefinition of who constitutes the people accompanied by mistrust and demonization of the 'other', which is predicated upon (and justified with recourse to) a re-imagining of the nation's and/or democracy's 'founding moment'. Furthermore, many populist movements make use of a political rhetoric revolving around the 'anti-subversive impulse' (Donner 1981) and seeking to instil fear and a sense of being under threat, which is aimed at deepening the crisis of the old

structure from which such movements themselves originate. As Savage has argued (2012: 572), ‘these discourses demonize the enemy, and this demonization, which represents opponents or enemies as illegitimate political actors, organizes their discourses. Laclau has fallen short of articulating this in his theory of empty signifiers’. Mouffe herself, notwithstanding her preoccupation with transforming antagonism into agonism, that is to say, with changing a friend-enemy relation into a democratic relation between adversaries, has not taken into consideration this important dimension of populist politics.

The paper is divided into three sections. The first part considers the main scholarly approaches to political populism and draws on Laclau’s and Mouffe’s theorising but also makes the case for understanding the crucial role of memory in populist constructions of an anti-hegemonic front. The second section discusses populism in the Italian case and puts forwards four propositions that it sets out to test in the following section. The main part of the paper analyses in some detail three populist leaders who rose to prominence in the Italian Second Republic in order to test how each redefined ‘the people’ through both empty signifiers and a re-imagining of the nation’s past. Finally, the conclusion revisits the concept of populism on the basis of the previous analysis.

Definitions of populism

Populism has become a widespread concept in political studies and given rise to a variety of approaches and definitions, reflecting the rise and success, across Europe, in Latin America, Asia and the United States, of parties and movements which appear to form a new breed and share a number of specific traits. Interpretations have differed widely. Some scholars have interpreted populism in terms of a ‘political style’, linked to an emotive ‘politics of faith’ which is an integral part of modern democracy, alongside a pragmatic, rational style (Canovan 1999). When pragmatism takes absolute precedence and the ‘promise of salvation [...] is not present within the mainstream political system it may well reassert itself in the form of a populist challenge’ (1999: 11). Similarly, Mouffe (2005: 64-72; 2012), drawing on Carl Schmitt’s (1996) [1932] concept of ‘the political’, argued that in liberal democracies the rise of populist movements of the right variety represents the reassertion of antagonistic politics due to the fact that mainstream politics has become too consensual and non-adversarial. One of the ways in which antagonism is reasserted is by recourse to ‘moralism’, because it turns ‘the we/they confrontation’ into ‘one between good and evil’ in which ‘the opponent can be perceived only as an enemy to be destroyed’ (2005: 5). More recently, populism has been

defined in terms of a ‘style that is *performed* and *enacted*’, hence as ‘*the repertoires of performance that are used to create political relations*’ (Moffitt and Tormey, 2013: 8).

Other scholars have defined populism as a ‘thin ideology’ (Abts, K. and Rummens, S. 2007; Albertazzi and McDonnell 2008; Mudde 2004, 2007, 2009; Stanley 2008), whose main traits consist in the belief that society is ‘ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, ‘the pure people’ and ‘the corrupt elite’, and that ‘politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people’ (Mudde 2007:23). Similarly, Albertazzi and McDonnell have defined populism as ‘an ideology which pits a virtuous and homogeneous people against a set of elites and dangerous ‘others’ who are together depicted as depriving (or attempting to deprive) the sovereign people of their rights, values, prosperity, identity and voice’ (2008: 3).

Laclau (2005a), by contrast, views populism in terms of a ‘political logic’ in so far as its recurrent appeal to the people allows the formation of a ‘chain of equivalence’ which links together different groups and unfulfilled demands into a hegemonic project opposed to the dominant one. This project can represent a popular struggle by excluded and subordinated groups against the dominant bloc or indeed a challenge aimed at shifting the balance of power within the dominant bloc, when the latter experiences a deep crisis (Oswell 2006: 88; File 2011). As Laclau states: ‘Some degree of crisis in the old structure is a necessary precondition of populism for [...] popular identities require equivalential chains of unfulfilled demands’ (2005a: 177).

Laclau’s theory represents a sharp break from other notions of populism, both because it rejects any definitions of populism based on ideology – populism is defined by its form and not by its content – and because it considers populist movements to be always particularistic yet also to portray themselves as representing the whole. The way they do this is twofold. First, by developing empty signifiers whose function is ‘to bring to equivalential homogeneity a highly heterogeneous reality’, hence ‘reducing to a minimum their particularistic content’ (2005b: 40). Second, by using these signifiers in order to claim representation for the whole of society or the entire nation, whereas in reality they represent only one part of it. Given that, whichever the prevalent interpretation, all scholars place the emphasis on the ‘appeal to the people’ as the one characteristic trait of populist politics, Laclau’s approach helps to clarify that ‘the people’ always refers only to a part rather than the whole, since populism ‘involves the division of the social scene into two camps. This division presupposes [...] the presence of some privileged signifiers which condense in themselves the signification of a whole antagonistic camp (the

‘regime’, the ‘oligarchy’, the ‘dominant groups’ and so on, for the enemy; the ‘people’, the ‘nation’, the ‘silent majority’, and so on, for the opposed underdog’) (2005a: 87).

While Laclau has been criticized for conflating populism with anti-hegemonic politics in ways that undermine ‘the conceptual particularity of populism as a tool for concrete political analysis’ (Stavrakakis 2004: 263), his (and Mouffe’s) post-Marxist theory has the advantage of addressing the wider issue of how popular movements are constructed in today’s heterogeneous and highly differentiated societies: ‘the dilemma of contemporary politics is how to create a unity out of diversity’ (Laclau and Campi 2008). However, Laclau’s concept of empty signifiers seems insufficient in accounting for the political practices populist movements engage in, and for the myths and imagery they make use of, which are often exclusionary as opposed to inclusionary. Mouffe, on the other hand, addresses this issue in her theory of agonistic democracy, seeking to promote agonism in place of antagonism, a process that requires transforming enemies into adversaries. Yet there appears to be a contradiction between her assertion that the task of democratic politics is to promote agonism and her positive view of populism (admittedly, of the left rather than the right variety).

As argued by Bell, ‘any conception of politics that ignores the power that myths or memories play in moulding identities and structures of power is destined to fail’ (2008: 162). To put it differently, it can be argued that constructing a ‘people’ requires not only developing empty signifiers but also constructing powerful myths which draw on a collective memory of an imagined past in order to define who belongs to the people. It is also the case that an excessive emphasis on the unifying traits of populism may obscure its simultaneously exclusionary traits. Thus Wodak, KhosraviNik and Mral (2013: 6) stressed that ‘the people’ is a highly ambivalent concept and that ‘The ambivalence of the concept can be exemplified by asking a question of the “defining other”: who is not part of “the people”?’ Indeed, Jagers and Walgrave (2007: 334) distinguished between four types of populism, one of which they defined explicitly as ‘excluding populism’.

Unsurprisingly, a few scholars have recently started to focus their attention on the role of memory in populism’s construction of both ‘the people’ and ‘the others’, by applying concepts derived from memory theory. Following Halbwachs (1950) and Nora (1984), research on social and collective memory and its role in the construction of cultural and political identities has flourished in the last two decades (J. Assmann 1995; Erll and Nünning 2008; Gillis 1996; Hoskins 2012; Stråth 2000). As Hoskins (2012: 74) stated, ‘to understand adequately the formation and maintenance of [...] political identities, it is necessary to analyse the irreducible and essential role that the use and abuse of memory plays in that process’. Ribeiro (2013: 226)

also argued that: ‘Who we are and who we want to be are questions often answered through a process of “rétroprojection” or “filiation inversée” [...] in which we choose the founding moments of an imagined past’. With specific reference to political populism, Chiantera-Stutte (2005: 394) remarked that ‘populism is about constructing and using a past [...] We could define this phenomenon as a sort of “selective memory”, which is used by institutions as well as by individuals, and which is very often directly decided by political agencies in order to consolidate the social bond. Populist movements use images of the past in order to cement the community’.

Even more forcefully, Savage (2012), revisiting Laclau’s (2005) theory of populism, argued that memory plays a very important role in populist discourse. According to Savage, the Tea Party in the USA demonises the enemy under the label of ‘communist’ and ‘socialist’. (2012: 572). More importantly, this demonisation paints the enemy as corrupting ‘an American tradition of values tied to the collective memory of the nation’s founding moment [...] This founding moment is a fabrication constituted through the social construction of a collective memory recalling key events in the American revolution and framing of the constitution’ (2012: 573). In short, the founding moment represents ‘the illusion of a once existing unified society that would otherwise be perfect if not for the disruption or disorder represented by the “enemy”’ (574).

What Seaton (2007: 7) called ‘memory rifts’ appears therefore to be an important dimension marking the rise of many populist parties as they actively re-imagine the past in ways which challenge the hegemonic collective memory. The next section elaborates further on the main traits of populist parties and leaders, specifically on their construction and uses of the past in relation to the Italian case during the Second Republic.

Populism in the Italian Second Republic

The Italian Second Republic (1992-2011) has been marked by the rise and success of populist parties and/or populist leaders, primarily, but not exclusively, on the right of the political spectrum. The main populist actors have been Silvio Berlusconi, leader of the liberal-conservative party Forza Italia (later Popolo della Libertà), formed in 1994, and Umberto Bossi, leader of the radical right party Lega Nord, founded in 1990 as a merger of various regional leagues. On the centre-left the main populist actor was Antonio Di Pietro, leader of Italy of Values, formed in 1998. Beppe Grillo and his MoVimento 5 Stelle are not considered in this paper, both because they appeared on the political scene towards the end of the Second

Republic and, most importantly, because academics and scholars disagree on whether they should be labelled as ‘populist’.

The previous three parties, and especially their leaders, were identified as populist by various scholars and commentators, although with some degree of differentiation. What these parties appear to have had in common is anti-elitism, hence a deep mistrust of and antagonism towards the political elites in the name of the common people conceived as a unitary entity. What distinguishes them, on the other hand, is the fact that in the case of the Lega Nord (as with other radical right parties) the ‘people’ is conceived in exclusionary terms along ethnic lines. Thus Ruzza and Fella (2009: 5) focussing primarily on the parties of the right, labelled both Forza Italia and the Lega Nord as populist in so far as they both pitted a ‘pure honest common people against a corrupt self-serving political elite’. However, in their view only the latter party articulated its political discourse in terms of exclusion by constructing internal and external groups as the ‘other’ (2009: 5). Similarly, Tarchi identified the populism of the Lega Nord as based ‘on a notion of the people as both *ethnos* and *demos*’, therefore on a rejection of other groups on the basis of their ethnicity as well as a rejection of the elites. By contrast, in his view, ‘the other political entrepreneurs of Italian populism have sought to give exclusive voice to the mass of citizens, supposedly neglected by indifferent and selfish elites’ (Tarchi 2008: 85-6).

In the rest of this paper I will seek to demonstrate that all three populist leaders *both* adopted a discourse of rejection of the political elites *and* constructed the people in ways which sought radically to redefine the polity in terms of legitimisation and de-legitimisation of friends and enemies. In light of the scholarly interpretations outlined in the previous section, the latter process seemingly required:

- 1) The construction of a chain of equivalence around key empty signifiers, as argued by Laclau.
- 2) A re-imagining of the founding moment of the nation which forcefully re-defines who belongs to the people and who does not.
- 3) The adoption of a strong moral register and the envisaging of those who are not part of ‘the people’ as enemies rather than adversaries, along the lines of antagonistic politics as defined by Mouffe.
- 4) Strong counter-subversion themes, or what Donner (1981: 47-8) defined as the ‘anti-subversive impulse’. Those not belonging to ‘the people’ are portrayed not just as

untrustworthy but as subversive and as conspiring against the national community and/or democracy, using propaganda designed to instil fear.

In the Italian context, the fiscal crisis of the state and the corruption crisis enveloping the political class in the early 1990s provided the favourable terrain for the emergence of counter-hegemonic populist movements and parties. When the First Republic ended in the wake of a huge corruption scandal, populist parties attacked the established consensus and redefined ‘the people’ both by developing empty signifiers and by dismantling the myths and symbols of the Republic, constructing alternative founding moments of the nation to those of the Risorgimento and the Resistance. The fall of the First Republic meant that anti-fascism as a founding myth for Italian democracy became open to contestation. In the ensuing ‘post-anti-fascist context’ (Martin 2005: 158), as various scholars recently remarked, memory rifts came to prominence. As Tarchi (2010: 389-90) argued, in the Second Republic ‘the past [...] returned to its position as a subject of cultural dispute with immediately political overtones’. Or, as Orsina put it (2010: 77), ‘In post-1994 Italy [...] it can be argued that the relationship between the political past and the political present has been even stronger than is normally the case’. However, the ensuing memory rifts were not considered as a function of political populism. Furthermore, as we saw, Forza Italia was conceptualised as a populist actor on the basis of its rejection of the political elites and not for redefining who belonged to ‘the people’ and who did not. Yet, as Orsina pointed out, ‘Silvio Berlusconi’s *discesa in campo* (entry into the political arena) influenced the persistence and transformation of the two main ideological axes that had structured Italian politics since 1945: anti-fascism and anti-communism’.

While Berlusconi developed ‘freedom’ as the main empty signifier to rally support around his project, he also focused on dismantling the myth of the Resistance and anti-fascism and constructing the myth of anti-communism as the founding moment of the nation, thereby excluding the heirs to the Communist Party from ‘the people’. This narrative was strongly resisted by those Italians who believed that ‘anyone who rejected [anti-fascism, the Resistance and the Constitution] would be ‘self-de-legitimised’ and thus excluded from the national democratic scene’ (Orsina, 2010: 80). This position was strongly adopted by Di Pietro, who relied on ‘moral values’ and ‘justice’ as the main empty signifiers, while (re)kindling the memory of fascistic, corrupt and occult forces operating within and threatening Italian (anti-fascist) democracy, hence excluding Berlusconi and his allies from ‘the people’. Both leaders often utilised the labels of ‘terrorists’ and ‘putschists’ to refer to political opponents, in ways which recalled 1970s terrorism, in order to de-legitimise the adversary as extraneous to

democracy and above all as actually posing a direct and impellent threat to the democratic socio-political order.

Finally, the Lega Nord and its leader successfully developed ‘federalism’ and ‘Padania’ as empty signifiers. The party also focussed upon dismantling the myth of the Risorgimento and constructing the myth of Padania as the founding moment of the (non-Italian) nation, thereby excluding southern Italians as well as immigrants from ‘the people’. Let us consider the memory work of these parties and their leaders in more detail.

The counter-hegemonic project of the Lega Nord

In the early 1990s, the Lega Nord developed a strongly anti-hegemonic project (Diamanti 1993). The party aimed at dismantling the prevailing political consensus around high levels of taxation and public spending, national and territorial solidarity, and concertative policy-making (Cento Bull 2003). The Lega’s main target was the ‘centralist state’, considered responsible for systematically robbing the productive North and benefitting the parasitic South, with the complicity of an entire political class. The Lega’s solution, as clearly stated by Bossi (1992), was the restructuring of the entire state and the creation of a federal system theorised as hostile to the welfare state and as promoting neo-liberal reforms.

According to Laclau, the Lega Nord can be defined as populist only in its early regionalist phase. However, in his view ‘the League’s failure to transform itself into a national force is at the root of its lack of success in becoming a truly populist party’ (2005a: 189). I would argue instead that the Lega was indeed successful in producing empty signifiers and constituting a chain of equivalence, despite its appeal being restricted to one area of the country. ‘Federalism’, in particular, was effective in aggregating disparate unfulfilled demands, ranging from those of small and medium sized entrepreneurs for lower taxes and less bureaucracy to those of factory workers for social protection as they feared the impact of globalisation upon jobs and standards of living to those of ordinary citizens clamouring for law and order. Initially conceived as a lever for reducing the level of public deficit, ‘federalism’ became increasingly an empty signifier, a messianic slogan, so much so that when it was taken up by other political parties the Lega swiftly replaced it with ‘secessionism’ and ‘Padania’.

Memory work played an important role in the construction of Padania and Padanians (Brunello 1998; Cavazza 1995). The Risorgimento was revisited as a movement restricted to a small elite and the process of unification as having taken place without (and often against) popular consensus. The nation was re-imagined as descending directly from the northern Italian city-states, and its ‘founding moment’ was seen as the time when a mythical rural-

industrial society occupied a unique historical landscape. The people of this imagined community were portrayed as sharing the same (positively rated) values, which had been handed down through generations: entrepreneurship, a strong work ethic, frugality, honesty, law-abidance, trust, and solidarity (Bossi 1992; Biorcio 1997). By contrast, southern Italians were portrayed as a foreign people who shared negatively evaluated traits: corruption, laziness, mistrust, excessive spending, and law-avoidance, all subsumed under the term *mafiosità* (Cento Bull 1996). Among Padanians themselves, certain groups were also identified as ‘the other’, specifically the criminals and the ‘free-riders’ (the unemployed and those who worked in the public sector). In the early 1990s, before the Lega Nord veered towards the extreme right, xenophobia and anti-immigration were less in evidence; nonetheless certain groups of immigrants were openly identified as ‘the other’ due to the negatively rated values which they supposedly shared: the Arabs and the Maghrebians.

Bossi’s direct attack upon the dominant political consensus and its anti-hegemonic project, therefore, relied on a) the construction of ‘the people’ in ways which fundamentally redefined who constituted the ‘defining other(s)’, perceived as enemies; b) the development of empty signifiers establishing a chain of equivalence between unfulfilled demands; c) a radical re-imagining of the founding moment of the national community. As for counter-subversion themes, in the early 1990s they focused on the threat to northern wealth and wellbeing represented by the growing ‘cancer’ of southern Mafioso values and organised crime syndicates (Agnew 2002). In later years, when the Lega Nord prioritised anti-immigration propaganda, the party linked the ‘invasion’ of immigrants into the country to a plot organised by the political left to enable them to take over power.

The counter-hegemonic project of Forza Italia

The counter-hegemonic project developed by Berlusconi must be understood in light of the collapse of the Italian First Republic in the early 1990s, following a massive corruption scandal known as Tangentopoli which in 1992 exposed systematic underhand deals between the business and political classes. This scandal was viewed by a majority of the Christian Democrats and the Socialist Party as having been orchestrated by left-leaning judges in connivance with the heir to the former Communist Party, which was attempting to gain political power by ‘criminalising’ its main adversaries. The scandal triggered Berlusconi’s entry into the political arena and, together with his personal legal problems, led him to take a radical stance against the Judiciary and above all against the political left (generically subsumed under the label ‘Communism’) at all levels. In his crusade against the left,

Berlusconi decided to ally his own party with both the Lega Nord and Alleanza Nazionale, the heir to the neo-fascist party MSI, in 1994. This coincided with the need to provide legitimacy to the latter party. As Tarchi (2010: 389-90) argued, 'The disappearance or radical transformation of those parties that had dominated the First Republic, and the passage to a new electoral system that encouraged the creation of large coalitions in a bipolar context, signalled the de facto legitimising of the MSI, which passed, in just a few months, from a marginal position to being a participant in government'.

Forza Italia's appeal to 'the people' thus simultaneously involved a redefinition of those who belonged and those who did not. On the one hand, Berlusconi developed the empty signifier of 'freedom' in order to establish a chain of equivalence between unfulfilled demands: freedom from taxes and bureaucracy, which appealed to businesspeople, freedom from fear, which appealed to ordinary citizens, freedom from judicial prosecution, which appealed to all those who had been involved in corrupt deals, ranging from the political class to petty fraudsters. On the other hand, the Communists and their heirs constituted the new 'defining other', while the heirs to the fascists were legitimised as belonging by right to the nation. This crucial redefinition of 'the people' marked a fundamental shift away from anti-fascism and the myth of the Resistance and, as in the case of the Lega Nord, it also required a mnemonic re-imagining of the founding moment of the nation. As Galli Della Loggia remarked in 2009, Berlusconi 'uses anti-communism in the same way in which the First Republic and its leaders used anti-fascism for forty years: as a foundational ideology of the political order and for legitimating self-identification. And therefore, simultaneously, in order to exclude all that cannot be related to it'.

Berlusconi's rise to power was thus marked by systematic revisionist campaigns concerning Italian contemporary history, with particular reference to the fascist regime, the Resistance and the 1960s and 1970s. Berlusconi launched a politics of memory (or rather counter-memory), enlisting journalists and historians in a concerted attempt to expose the evil deeds of the Communists during the Resistance while re-legitimising the fascist regime and rehabilitating those who had joined the Italian Social Republic, established by Mussolini after the Armistice of 8 September 1943, and fought alongside the Germans against the Allies and the Italian Partisans. Indeed the partisan fighters had long been depicted by the radical right during the First Republic as 'terrorists', thereby denying the Resistance any legitimacy as a founding myth.

As for the 1960s and 70s, these two decades were constantly represented as a cultural catastrophe, a period when leftist intellectuals succeeding in penetrating and controlling vital

social and cultural centres, including the Judiciary, schools and universities and the press. Berlusconi's virtual monopoly of Italy's private television channels as well as his ownership of newspapers and publishing houses, gave him ample powers to stage an onslaught against left ideas and values, which he dubbed the 'Communist cultural hegemony'. Former left-wing intellectuals played an important role in this, as they were able to bring their past experience and personal memories to bear when they denounced the intolerance and authoritarianism of the Italian Left. A prominent example is the journalist and writer Giampaolo Pansa, himself a former Resistance fighter, who wrote various bestsellers on the plight of fascists killed by former members of the Resistance after the Second World War. More recently, he published an autobiography, significantly and provocatively entitled 'The Revisionist' (2009), in which he outlined the intolerant and dogmatic stance of Italian Communists, whose cultural hegemony reached its height in the 1970s, despite the evident failure of their political project and ideas. Another intellectual who campaigned tirelessly against the leftist values of the 1960s and 70s is Giuliano Ferrara, ex-Communist Party member, editor of the pro-Berlusconi newspaper *Il Foglio* from 1996 until 2015. Right intellectuals also played their part. Thus in 2007 Marcello Veneziani published a full scale attack on 1968 for Berlusconi's publishing house Mondadori, entitled *Rovesciare il 68* ('Toppling 1968').

A particularly strident dimension of the 'politics of memory' carried out by Berlusconi and his post-fascist allies concerned the labels of 'terrorism' and 'terrorists' attributed to the left opponents, including the judiciary, which was itself compared to a subversive organisation on a par with the Red Brigades. At a time when the country's leaders could have promoted a process of national reconciliation and commemoration as regards the political violence that had raged during the First Republic, some of them opted instead to rekindle the memory of the bloody past in order to deny the democratic credentials of their opponents. Let us examine these aspects more in detail.

In 2001, Berlusconi denounced a campaign of hatred orchestrated by the left against himself which had led to the circulation of threatening leaflets with the symbol of the Red Brigades. In 2004, on the 10th anniversary of the founding of Forza Italia, Berlusconi gave a speech in which he referred to the 'ideological hatred' promoted by the left in Italy, representing a continuation of the 'civil war' that had raged after the end of the Second World War and 'during the terrible period between 1960 and 1980, when in Italy there were more than 12000 violent attacks' (*La Repubblica*, 24 January). In 2010 and again in 2011, the Berlusconi government decided not to send any representatives to the annual commemoration of the 1980 Bologna bombing massacre. The government justified this decision by accusing

both the event and the victims of having been hijacked by the left for its campaign of hatred against its political adversaries. Without ever mentioning the neo-fascist activists found guilty of the massacre, Under-Secretary of State Carlo Giovanardi, a former Christian Democrat, took the opportunity of the commemoration in 2010 to portray the Communist Party as supporters of the left terrorists and simultaneously denied the democratic credentials of the heirs to the party. In 2012, the then leader of the Democratic Party, Pierluigi Bersani, was explicitly depicted as an armed terrorist in a graphic caricature published in a right-wing newspaper close to Berlusconi, thereby creating a sense of continuity between his party and 1970s terrorism (*Libero*, 27 August).

In April 2011, during the electoral campaign for the administrative elections, an association linked to Berlusconi's party put posters up in Milan with the slogan 'Get the Red Brigades out of the public prosecutor's offices', deliberately comparing judges to terrorists. The posters provoked a furore. While the person responsible, Roberto Lassini, took all the blame upon himself, the posters provided a clear picture of Berlusconi's own thoughts on the matter. Berlusconi, in fact, had himself defined the Italian judiciary in the press as worse than the Red Brigades, since the latter used arms whereas the former used judicial power as a weapon for its own subversive project. Indeed he coined the term 'judicial *brigadism*' and referred explicitly to the 'red cell' of judges who were intent on attacking him. He repeatedly accused the judiciary of behaving towards him as it had behaved in 1993, when it had destroyed the democratic parties.

In short, the memory of terrorism provided Berlusconi with a further repertoire of moral labels and images (in addition to those portraying Italian Communists as supporters of bloody totalitarian regimes during the First Republic) in order to simultaneously reconstruct the 'founding moment' of Italian democracy around a new anti-communist paradigm and depict the heirs to the Communist Party as a disruptive force. As Savage (2012) argued in relation to the Tea Party, the Communists and their successors were painted as an enemy because they disrupted the 'founding moment' of Italian democracy in terms of its values and constitution. And as argued by Berlet (2012) also in relation to the Tea Party, populist rhetoric was used to develop fear of an imminent Communist subversion posing a direct and impellent threat to the democratic socio-political order. The framing of the heirs to the Communist Party as terrorists contributed a powerful rhetorical device to this end.

Conversely, the re-imagining of the Resistance and the civil war of 1943-45 was aimed at legitimising the heirs to the Neo-Fascist party and thus integrate them fully into the nation. As Tarchi (2010: 389-90) argued, 'the inevitable reaccreditation of the [MSI] following the

disappearance of the DC and its allies required, for the components of the new centre-right Pole of Freedom (Polo della Libertà), a lightening of the darker shades of the memory of the authoritarian regime’.

The counter-hegemonic project of Italy of Values and the populist left

In parallel and in ways that overlap with these media campaigns by Berlusconi and his allies, the populist left developed its own counter-hegemonic project. Former magistrate and prosecutor Antonio di Pietro, who in 2000 went on to form Italia dei Valori (IdV, or Italy of Values), was most prominent and active among the wider movement which strove to achieve power by appealing to the people against the dominant right coalition led by Berlusconi.

As indicated by various scholars, Italy of Values presented populist traits. Among these we find a charismatic and even despotic leadership, defined by Chiapponi (2013: 309) as an ‘agitator’s leadership’ aimed at mobilizing ‘the common man’ against the established elites; an ideology that exalted ‘the people’ as carrier of highly positive values (Bordignon 2013: 146; Tranfaglia 2014); an attempt to present itself as being beyond the left-right divide as well as strong support for various forms of direct democracy in order to empower ‘the people’ (Cingari 2007: 36-7). The party had another specific trait, known as ‘justicialism’, which refers to the need to clean up Italian democracy in a radical manner through an alliance between civil society, political parties and the Judiciary. As a former Judge whose civic stature and media exposure rose to new heights during the 1992 corruption scandal which brought down the Italian First Republic, Di Pietro and his party aimed at cementing and leading a wide socio-political movement against Berlusconi and his allies. Di Pietro considered Berlusconi as representative of a deeply corrupt and underhand system of power, against which he successfully mobilised popular support around the empty signifiers of ‘morality’, ‘justice’ and ‘anti-corruption’. The movement appealed to disparate groups ranging from those who opposed neo-liberalism to those who believed that the end of the First Republic should bring about radical progressive policies. It constructed ‘the people’ as being made up of the ‘healthy’ and honest majority of Italians, oppressed by a corrupt and powerful minority in connivance with organised crime.

Similarly to Berlusconi, Di Pietro and his party also drew heavily upon the memory of the First Republic in order to redefine who belonged and who was excluded from ‘the people’. Di Pietro too drew a line of continuity between the First and the Second Republics. Berlusconi was considered the trait d’union between the two republics, and was, therefore, systematically depicted as being at the head of a corrupt/mafioso/masonic/fascistic system of power bent upon

attacking the democratic institutions and ultimately overthrowing them by way of a coup d'état and/or by a new type of terrorism. From this perspective, Berlusconi was considered intent in implementing the infamous 'Plan of Democratic Renewal' devised by the secret Masonic Lodge Propaganda 2 (P2), which was discovered in 1981 and found to have plotted against the democratic system established after 1945. In this representation, the old system of power had allegedly gathered around Berlusconi after the fall of the First Republic and engineered his rise to power. The memory of the threats to democracy (including several attempted coups d'état) that Italy had endured in the late 1960s and in the 1970s was thus invoked against Berlusconi. Reminding Italians that the Forza Italia leader had himself been a P2 member, Di Pietro painted Italy as facing a democratic emergency and Berlusconi as a 'rapist of democracy' and as a 'putschist'. This counter-memory and its related media campaign involved primarily Italia dei Valori but also prominent left journalists like Marco Travaglio and media outlets, including the TV show *Annozero* and the daily *Il Fatto Quotidiano*. Let us consider some examples.

On his blog and in the press Antonio Di Pietro repeatedly accused Berlusconi of promoting violence (December 2009), of being a 'political terrorist' (October 2011), and even compared him to Bin Laden (January 2011). Above all Di Pietro charged Berlusconi with being at the head of a 'P2-style government' and with secretly organising a coup d'état. In his view there needed to be a widespread media campaign as well as mobilisation on the part of the citizens in order to stop such a coup. On 9 July 2009, when the G8 met at L'Aquila, Italy of Values bought an entire page of the International Herald Tribune, entitled 'Appeal to the International Community: Democracy is in Danger in Italy', in which it denounced the Berlusconi government's attempt to transform the country into a 'de facto dictatorship'. By 2011 Di Pietro considered the situation to have taken on a new urgency and made a direct appeal to 'the people': 'Today all democrats, politicians, citizens and institutions have a duty to react to this shameful and dangerous situation and put a stop to the creeping coup d'état that Silvio Berlusconi is attempting [...] There is only one urgency: to stop this *golpista* before it is too late' (<http://www.antoniodipietro.it/2011/01/il-golpista>). In March 2013, during the electoral campaign, he went as far as to state that Berlusconi should be put on trial for his attempt to organise a 'creeping' coup d'état using his money in place of tanks.

Di Pietro's denunciations of the links between a corrupt past system of power and Berlusconi's style of government were amplified by the public interventions of other prominent members of his own party as well as media personalities. In 2010, when the Berlusconi government refused to send representatives to the annual commemoration of the Bologna bombing, IdV leader Luigi De Magistris retaliated that the citizens protesting in

Bologna testified to the need for justice in relation to a shameful period of Italian history during which ‘deviated’ state institutions and terrorism, masterminded by a pervasive P2, jeopardised Italian democracy for good (<http://www.agenparl.it/articoli/news/news/20100802-strage-bologna-de-magistris-idv-frasi-di-giovanardi-offensive>). Another IdV leader, Palermo Mayor Leoluca Orlando, repeatedly denounced Berlusconi’s Mafia-style system of power in various interviews granted to foreign newspapers. In April 2011, in response to the incident with the Milan posters in which Italian judges had been compared to terrorists, journalist Marco Travaglio wrote a piece in his blog, entitled ‘Arrest him’, in which he stated that:

Today it is no longer the terrorists (fortunately now extinct) who work to demolish the state and its institutions: rather, it is the Prime Minister and his vast court of happy servants, bought allies, and paid extras. And they are much more dangerous than the terrorists (who ended up unwittingly propping up the system, whereas the others [Berlusconi and his allies] dismantle it from within) because nobody denounces their threat, because they control militarily the institutions and television, and above all because they enjoy immunity and cannot be arrested. Instead of automatic rifles, they use laws, tv and newspapers as weapons. (<http://oknotizie.virgilio.it/go.php?us=70c100dc2f75bf66>)

The counter-hegemonic project of Antonio Di Pietro and the populist left therefore relied both on empty signifiers and on reviving the memory of an active and militant anti-fascism as the founding moment of Italian democracy. This in turn allowed it to attach the label of enemy not just to the neo-fascist party but to Berlusconi and his allies, due to their presumed role in masterminding coups d’état during the First Republic and in systematically attempting to subvert the democratic institutions by means of a new form of terrorism during the Second. It was then deemed justifiable to take drastic measures to tackle the emergency which ensued as a result. These measures set out to ostracise the ‘enemy’, whether through arrest, special legislation, or popular mobilisation.

Conclusion

If we accept Laclau’s argument that populism represents a counter-hegemonic project in opposition to the dominant one, then the common denominator of all populist movements is indeed the rejection of the political elites and the establishment, as identified in the current literature. The other common trait identified in the literature on populism, a constant appeal to

‘the people’, must also be viewed as necessary in order to link together different groups and demands within a counter-hegemonic project. To achieve this aim, populist movements must be able to construct empty signifiers which appeal to a large section of the population and establish a chain of equivalence between multiple unfulfilled demands.

This paper has argued that what many populist actors also have in common is the need to radically redefine who is included or excluded from ‘the people’ in relation to the dominant hegemonic project and that this fundamental redefinition rests on a (re)construction of the past and specifically on a re-imagining of the founding moment of the national and/or democratic community (Savage 2012), hence on a ‘memory rift’ with the official collective memory. In the case of populist actors, such mnemonic work often takes on a strong counter-subversive mode (Donner 1981), in which those who are constructed as not belonging are portrayed, in Manichean terms, as disruptive of the founding moment and as posing an imminent threat to ‘the people’.

Many populist actors can therefore be defined as ‘mnemonic warriors’:

Mnemonic warriors tend to espouse a single, unidirectional, mythological vision of time. The alternative visions of the past –by definition, ‘distorted’ – need to be deligitimised and destroyed. Additionally, in such mythical constructions of time the distinction between the past, present, and future is sometimes collapsed. The present is constructed as permeated by the ‘spirit’ of the past, and if this spirit is defective, the foundations of the polity are corrupted. (Bernhard and Kubik, 2014: 13)

The Italian case indicates that populist leaders after the fall of the First Republic behaved as mnemonic warriors, collapsing the distinction between the Second Republic and its predecessor, and constructing their opponents as corrupting the ‘foundations of the polity’, to which end they did not shy away from utilising the label of ‘terrorist’. As Chagankerian (2013) argued: ‘The actor labelled as terrorist symbolizes the bad, the evil, whereas the labelling actor represents himself as the righter of wrongs. There is consequently a Manichean approach in discourses relative to terrorism condemnation’. The label of terrorist, therefore, immediately evokes the moral battle between good and evil which Mouffe identifies with antagonistic, rather than agonistic, politics.

The Italian case also shows that it is not only radical right movements and leaders that behave like mnemonic warriors, although in their case this trait is particularly in evidence. This suggests that populist movements, in constructing a collective ‘we’ out of disunity, often tend to rely upon the construction and demonisation of a common enemy. As argued by

Savage (2012: 572), Laclau fell short of incorporating this latter dimension in his theory. As for Mouffe, she both states (Korbik 2014) that populism ‘is a necessary dimension of democratic politics’ yet also acknowledges that ‘the crucial issue is how the “people” is constructed’, that is to say, in ways that focus on inclusion rather exclusion and view opponents as adversaries as opposed to enemies. From this perspective, it would seem that populism’s reliance upon exclusionary, delegitimising and demonising mnemonic practices in its construction of ‘the people’ needs to be conceptually addressed by theorists, especially by those who adopt a counter-hegemonic agonistic approach.

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